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THE KINGDOM OF GOD¹

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So elaborate and persistent has been the study of the term "kingdom of God (or heaven)" during the past few years that we may be said to be reaching the limit of our positive knowledge concerning the history of the concept which it expresses. There is and probably will continue to be a different emphasis laid by different interpreters upon different aspects of its meaning, but it cannot be far from accurate to say that all available material that has come over from the New Testament times has been used in this investigation. It is possible now to shape up the results of the study with some accuracy, although as has been intimated, such a summary is certain to be marked by the personal equation of the summarizer.

First of all it is necessary to distinguish between the study of a word and that of an elaborated concept of which the word expresses only one phase. Philology and word-study must here be supplemented by the general study of the social mind as it shaped the hopes of the time of Christ. In such a study it becomes at once evident that the idea of God's rule over mankind never ceased to be a political conception. God's sovereignty was to be embodied in his kingdom, and this kingdom was to be composed of Jews. The courage, one might almost say the audacity, of such expectation becomes all the more marked when one recalls that the Jews never were a world-power, and that the moments of most intense hope for imperial sway were moments of the deepest oppression. Deutero-Isaiah, the Enoch literature, the Psalms of Solomon, the apocalypses of the first Christian century were all the outgrowth of supreme national misery. This confidence of the Jews in their glorious future is what is commonly called the Messianic Hope, but the idea of the personal Messiah who had been empowered to perform this work of natural

¹ This study covers the International Uniform Sunday-School Lessons for June 12, 19, 26, July 3 and 10.

salvation was not always present in the hope. The fundamental conception was that Jehovah, the God of the Jews, as the only true God, must inevitably triumph over his enemies and bring to triumph over its enemies the one people who thoroughly served him. It makes small difference that the term "kingdom of God" almost never appears in the pre-Christian writings of Judaism; the concept of the rule of Jehovah first over a re-established Jewish nation, and then through it over all the world, was the inspiration of an entire people.

Such a world-wide triumph of God and of God's people the Pharisees ceased to expect from the ordinary processes of statecraft. They looked for a miracle and in proportion as miracle seemed the only means of fulfilling their hope did their conception of the kingdom of God grow more transcendental. True, it never became identical with what Christians have called heaven, but it was increasingly believed to possess supernatural elements. It was not to be established by war, but by the word of the mouth of the Christ.

In studying the teaching of Jesus concerning the kingdom of God everything depends upon remembering that he seized upon this conception of his people. He no more invented the fundamental content of the term than he invented the term itself. What he did do was to start with the expectation of the kingdom which God would establish in the future and show both its true nature and the prerequisites for its membership. The group of passages which are to be studied by the Sunday schools during the month of June are characteristic examples of his teaching as regards both method and content.

I. THE EXTENSION OF THE BLESSINGS OF THE KINGDOM TO
GENTILES: MATT., CHAP. 15

Did Jesus originally expect that others than Jews would become members of the kingdom of God? Any answer to this question must be by implication rather than from expressed statement. Jesus nowhere says explicitly that he would continue the ethnic expectation of his people, yet, because of our inability to locate with chronological precision the times in which his various sayings were uttered, it has of late been discussed as to whether there might not have been in his mind a development from the ethnic to the universal conception. The first interpretation of his words would seem to indicate that he expected

his first followers to come from Jews, and that, as appears in his directions to the Twelve, he expected that their first mission would be to them. The exclusion of gentiles and Samaritans from their mission can be explained, however, as a practical expedient. At the time the disciples first went on their preaching tour they certainly lacked any catholic conception of the extent of the gospel, and further than that, the Jews offered the nearest and the logical point of contact. According to the Synoptics, also, Jesus at the start limited his own activities to his own people. There came a time, however, when circumstances forced him to face the problem of the extension of his work to gentiles. And this it is possible for us to locate with accuracy.

After his rejection by the Pharisees and the leaders of his people, and particularly after the conspiracy to put him out of the way, he found himself forced to leave Galilee and go out into the gentile territory to the north and west. It is hardly to be questioned that in this journey he was primarily interested in withdrawing his disciples from the antagonism and controversies which his success in Galilee had engendered in order that he might teach them more fully. But Syrophenicia abounded with Jews and his fame had extended to them and through them to the gentiles. As Mark graphically states, he could not be hid (Mark 7:24). It was on this journey that the problem of his relations to the non-Jewish world reached a crisis. The occasion was a woman's wit and a mother's love.

In the episode there are several points worthy of special attention. In the first place we see Jesus facing the question as to the practicability of extending his mission at that moment beyond the Jews. With the request of the Canaanitish woman that he should cure her daughter Jesus for the first time actually faced this issue. The account in Matthew is more vivid than that in Mark for it represents the woman as attributing to Jesus the messianic title, "the Son of David." This, however, is only one of the variations in the accounts in the first and second gospels. So different are these accounts that it is difficult to believe that the Matthew form is a rewriting of Mark's. It seems more like an independent account of the same event. But in both gospels there are the same elements of fact. Matthew particularly emphasizes Jesus' first refusal to work the cure in the statement, "I was not sent but unto the lost sheep of the House of Israel."

The eloquent plea of the woman: "Lord, help me," however, brought to bear upon him the supreme motive of his life. The reply of the woman relative to the right of dogs to have at least the crumbs which fall from the family table gave the occasion. It was not a case of being bettered in repartee by the woman, unique as this is in the life of Jesus, which led to his helping her. It was rather the appeal of love. His mission up to that moment had been wisely limited to the Jews, and, according to John, to Samaritans, but here was the woman actually before him pleading for help which the spirit of love could not forbear giving. The method yielded to the aim of his life, and he cured the woman's daughter.

The significance of this act on the part of Jesus is to be still further appreciated from Matt. 15:29-31, as compared with Mark 7:31-37. After leaving Syrophoenicia he passed around to the north of the Sea of Galilee, then over to Decapolis, where he healed many persons. The significance of this account seems to be pointed out in Matt. 15:31, "They glorified the God of Israel." The simplest interpretation of this unusual phrase would seem to be that the gentiles of Decapolis, seeing the gracious work of the Jew, attributed praise to the God of the Jews. If this be a fair interpretation of the passage it would seem hardly too much to say that in his meeting with the gentile woman of Syrophoenicia Jesus saw an opportunity to disclose his realization of the universality of his ministry or at least of the timeliness of such a wide mission, for from that time he devoted himself with less reserve to the preaching of the kingdom as a blessing intended for men of all nationalities.

II. THE KINGDOM OF GOD AS SET FORTH IN PARABLES

The thirteenth chapter of Matthew contains a group of parables dealing with the different aspects of the kingdom. The topics they treat might be stated in the following fashion:

1. 13:1-9: Explanation of the fact that different results come from the preaching of the gospel.
2. Vss. 24-30: The ultimate triumph of the kingdom over all opposing forces.
3. Vss. 31-33: The magnificent completion of the kingdom despite the small beginnings of its announcement.

4. Vss. 44-46: The supreme value of the kingdom as a justification of sacrifice in its behalf.

5. Vss. 47-50: The separation of those who are true members of the kingdom from those who have joined it hypocritically.

This collection of parables is all the more remarkable because in two cases Jesus attached to them his own interpretation. The student is thus able to discover Jesus' own conception of what a parable taught and also to discover in his interpretation a general principle which can be extended to other parables. This general principle very simple; namely: Interpret only such elements of an illustration or parable as actually contribute to the understanding of a dominant analogy which is set forth by the story itself.

1. *The parable of the Sower*.—In this exquisite little illustration Jesus seizes upon the obvious fact that the same seed sown in different sorts of soil produces different harvests. And this is the only lesson which Jesus would have the parable illustrate. Yet in order to make this lesson plain there are certain subsidiary lessons which explain why the preaching of the gospel has different results among different people and these subsidiary lessons are carried in the subsidiary and contributing elements of the story. One might, indeed, throw the lesson of the parable into a series of formal analogies: as seed sown on hard, beaten ground brings forth no harvest, so the word of the Kingdom has no effect upon the minds that give it no attention; as seed sown on thin soil over ledge soon springs up and just as soon withers because of lack of soil, so certain persons hear the word of the Kingdom and immediately respond, but the same over-quick reaction leads them to abandon the word when persecution arises; as seed sown in ground which is good but already preoccupied by thorns springs up but fails to come to fruitage because it is choked out by thorns, so the gospel in strong lives springs up but fails of real results because those lives are engrossed in business or other worldly concerns; and finally, as seed sown on good soil brings harvest but yet in some sort of proportion to the character of the soil, so the gospel in hearts that are ready to receive and follow it produce results although not always in the same measure.

Such teaching as this comes with real comfort to the Christian worker who has done his best and yet sees few results. It is as if

Jesus said to such a person, Do not be discouraged, much more do not abandon the gospel. It is not the fault of the word, but of the lives to whom the word comes. If the proper attention is given the gospel its results come inevitably, but such results cannot come when it is made secondary to any other interest or is in any other way treated indifferently or lightly.

2. *The parable of Delayed Judgment* (Matt. 13:24-30; 36-43).—The parable of the Wheat and the Tares is interpreted by Jesus. Here again one sees the economy in interpretation. The parable touches one of the most disturbing features of life, and its problem can be stated very simply: Shall the members of the kingdom undertake the violent punishment of the enemies of the kingdom? The parable, like some of the others of Jesus' is not from a literary point of view academically self-consistent. We should expect the children of the kingdom, or the good wheat, themselves to undertake the elimination of the tares, or evil men and institutions. But for Jesus to treat the matter in such fashion would have been to transform the parable into something like a fable. He keeps the essential issue before his disciples but prefers reality to absolutely literal consistency. The teaching of this parable is very simple. It is not centered upon any incidental matter like the similarity of the tares and the wheat, nor does it primarily emphasize the danger of injuring the wheat while pulling up the tares, important as that may be. The really significant teaching of the parable is that the desire to eliminate the enemies of the kingdom of God is to await the end of the age when God will himself establish his great assize and destroy whatever is hostile to his kingdom.

As regards such teaching so little pleasing to impatient Christians and at first glance so hostile to social reform, it must be said that Jesus was probably not thinking of social reform in the ordinary sense of the word. The question of the right of government to handle criminals and to punish those who in any way injure society was not in his mind. The real purpose of the parable is the inhibition of persecution. It is so easy for spiritual people to use unspiritual means for the establishment of truth that Jesus warned them to leave the punishment of the enemies of the kingdom to God himself. That punishment, he assured his disciples, is inevitable, although postponed,

and it will be one in which the relative position of the members of the kingdom and their enemies will be abundantly exhibited. In a certain sense the parable is a projection of Jesus' so-called teaching as to non-resistance, with the additional note of trust in the inevitable triumph of the righteous.

3. *The limitless growth of the kingdom* (Matt. 13:31-33).—Two beautiful parables are used by Jesus to set forth the thrilling fact that however small the kingdom might be in its inception, its triumph was to be limitless. Though in its beginning it was as small among organizations as the mustard seed was among all other seeds yet its end would be one of proportionate growth. This seems to be the simple trust enforced by this parable. Commentators have sometimes discovered truth of another sort in its sentences, even going so far as to describe the birds that nested on its branches as heretics. This, however, is obviously fanciful. It is useless to attempt any interpretation of the details of the parable beyond its great central thought of tremendous growth.

Similarly in the case of the yeast: the thought is still that the kingdom, although it has small beginnings, is to have a great ending, although the idea of the growth by transformation is, naturally, suggested by the yeast. The entire mass of meal was to be affected by the leaven. But it is unwise to push this conception exegetically. It is, of course, true that Christian men and women are to transform society, and in that sense it is, of course, true that the kingdom of God is to transform society. But it is difficult to show that Jesus conceived of the kingdom as anything other than an ultimate reality that God was to introduce. It would be possible to give the proper emphasis to the conception of development if we interpreted the parable as referring not so much to the kingdom itself as to the "word" of the kingdom. Although the response to it was at the start very small, yet so capable is the gospel of transforming mankind that ultimately the entire social order would become filled with its principles. This great hope would find its fullest completion in the coming of the kingdom, but until it came, men under the influence of the gospel would come increasingly to do God's will on earth as it is in heaven.

4. *The supreme value of the kingdom* (Matt. 13:44-46).—In these

two parables Jesus turns from agriculture to trading. In them he sets forth his philosophy of self-sacrifice. And this philosophy is simple and profound: It is wise and advantageous to sacrifice a poorer good for a supreme good. Jesus does not here argue that the kingdom is supreme; he assumes that and illustrates the degree of its supremacy. In both parables the emphasis is upon the thought that a man in trading gave up everything that he had in order to get a single article of supreme value. Thus the man who found the treasure hid in the field sold all that he had to buy the field with his treasure; the merchant who was seeking goodly pearls sold all that he had to buy the most perfect pearl he had ever seen. The wisdom of making such a bargain by which one gets something worth more than that which he gives up is the only point that ought to be pressed in these two parables. Incidentally, of course, it is true that in one case a man stumbles upon a treasure unexpectedly and in the other he found it after he searched for it. But such differences are merely the clothing of the teaching.

Regarding this group of teaching as something of a unit, we find that Jesus conceives of the blessing of the kingdom of God as not limited to the Jew; that the progress of the gospel is determined by the conditions under which and to whom it is preached; that there was none the less an unenviable distinction between those who accepted his principles and those who rejected them, and that this distinction will be made by God himself. Then as if to encourage his disciples he asserted that the slow progress of the gospel is no argument against its ultimate supreme good in all human experience.

As if to clarify still further his position, Jesus gives the parable of the fish-net. In this parable, as it were, he shows that the mere formal inclusion in the midst of the community of those who await the kingdom is no guarantee of enjoying the blessings of the kingdom. Just as the worthless fishes which have been drawn up in the great seine are picked up and thrown away, so the worthless members of the Christian community are to be similarly removed. It is a parable of warning against hypocrisy and self-complacency, and as such protected Jesus from the charge of excessive optimism.